

Party on; Bob

downtown images

One man's
▲ quixotic vision
of a citywide
weekly party
Downtown

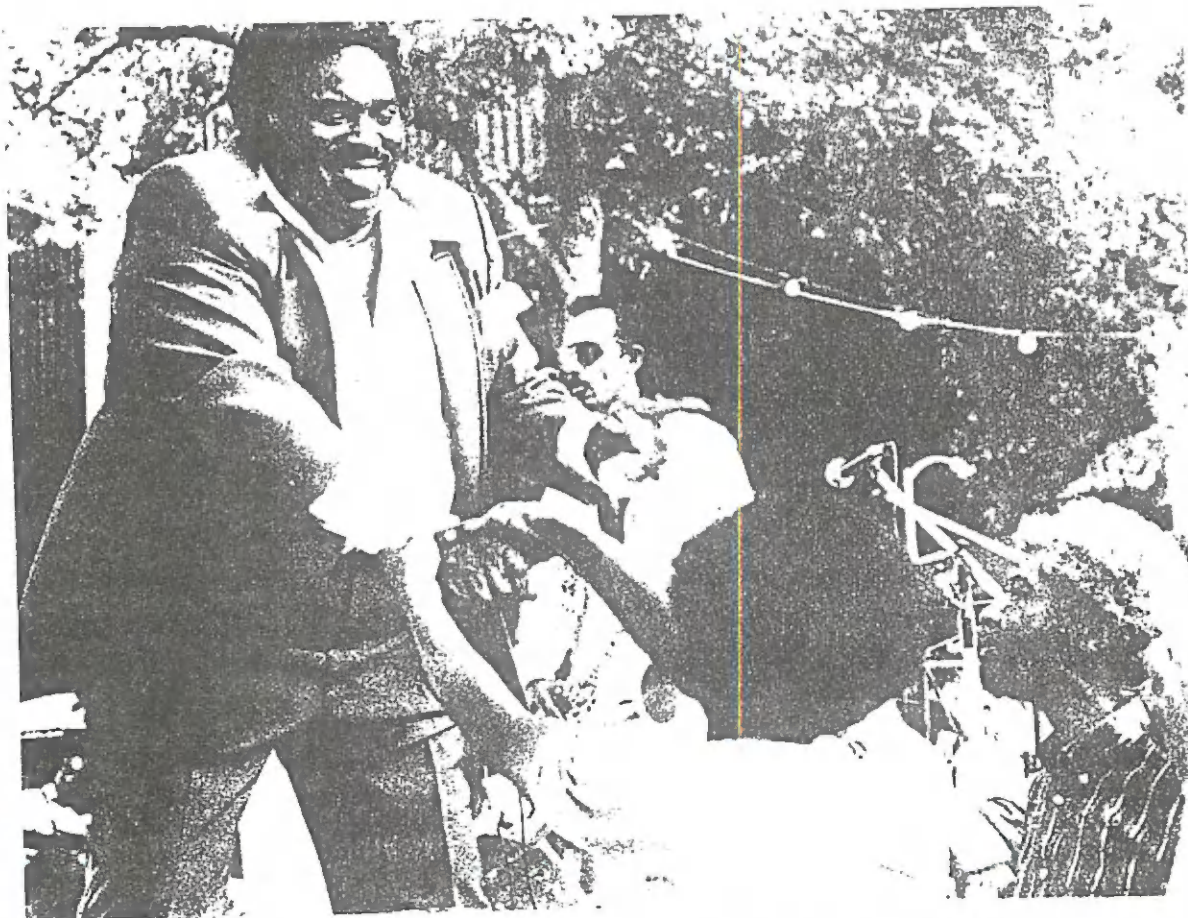
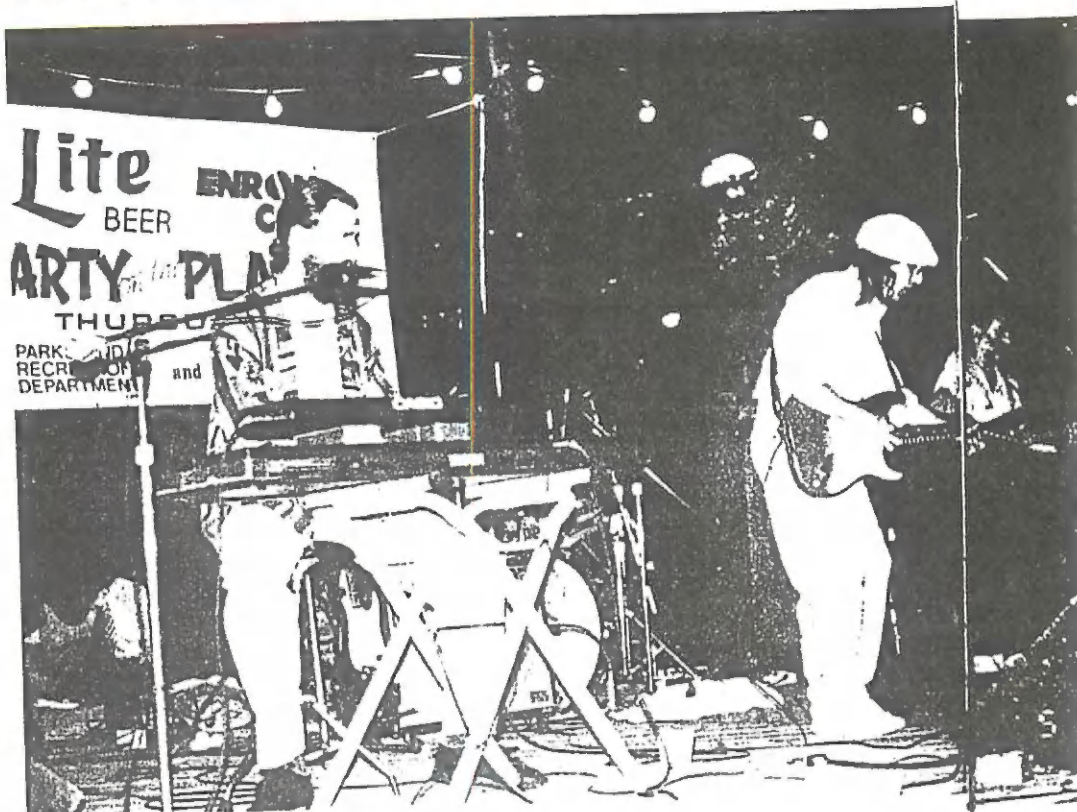


by elise perachio



In 1987, Bob Borochoff, restaurateur and owner of Epic Special Events, was having just a little trouble convincing potential sponsors that his idea for a weekly Downtown party on Jones Plaza was going to be so great that it would draw in crowds of people not only from surrounding buildings, but also from all over the city. But as anyone knows who drives (or attempts to drive) past Jones Plaza after 5 p.m. on any Thursday between March and November, that party, better known as Party on the Plaza, attracts wall-to-wall people. One glance at the wide range of attire reveals that by no means did all these people just pop over from neighboring office buildings.

However, in those early days, it would have taken a person with an incredible imagination and persuasive abilities to believe that Party on the Plaza would be anything like the Downtown institution it has become. A still incredulous Borochoff admits, "No one





envisioned what we ended up with today. I've had buy-out offers in the six figures."

In September of 1987, Borochoff, armed with eight employees, four Port-O-Lets, one police officer, one band and no sponsors, threw the first Party on the Plaza. Pre-party publicity consisted of flyers circulated in the Downtown area. About 20 people showed up

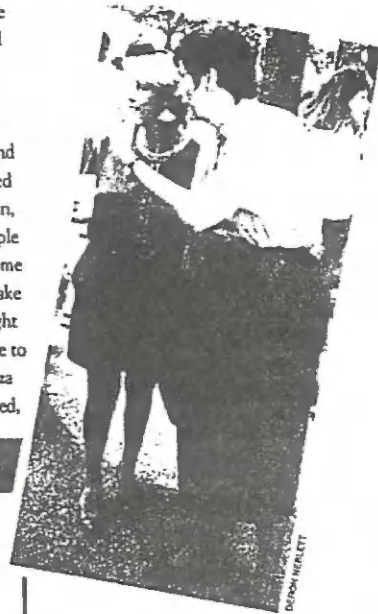
"No one envisioned what we ended up with today. I've had buy-out offers in the six figures."

and that night Borochoff went home about \$4,000 poorer. The next several weeks were no better.

Borochoff was serving beer himself and having a hard time lining up decent entertainment. "I remember one week a guy went up there with a boom box and an amp. He put the microphone by the boom box and played along with a tape of Led Zeppelin II."

Meanwhile, Borochoff was continuing to lose several thousand dollars a week, and yet he persisted with his crazy dream: to have a fun, free event that would expose people to local bands, eventually raise some money for charity and, ideally, make a profit. However, when he thought about how he was going to be able to continue to host Party on the Plaza through October as he had planned,

the reality of finances reared its ugly head. "I did some mental calculations and realized I was going to lose \$32,000," he says. "But I went out there and I did it the next week and we lost money again. I had to use my Mastercard to pay for the bills in my

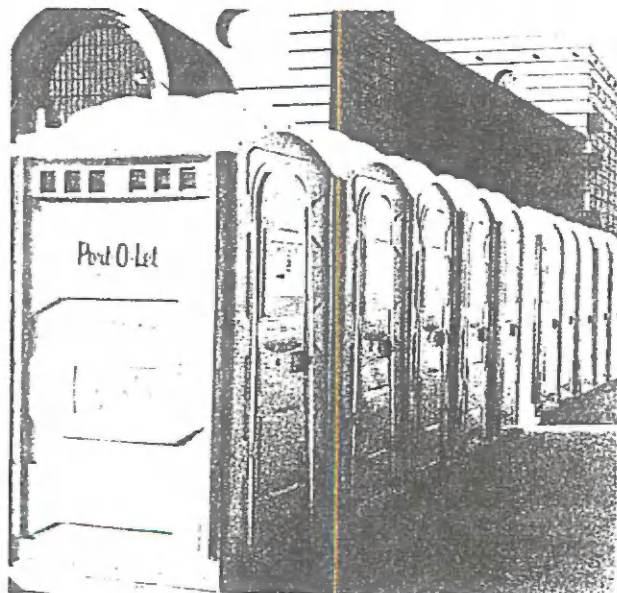


THE PARTY: THEN AND NOW

	Fall of 1987	Summer of 1992
Partiers	20 per week	5,000+ per week
EPIC employees	8	50
Port-O-Lets	4	40
Security	1 off-duty police officer	39 security officers
Entertainment	1 local band	2 bands
Sponsors	0	2
Entertainment budget	\$250 per week	\$5,000 per week

restaurant (Back Bay)."

Luckily, before the situation got critical, Borochoff was able to convince Frank Hurlock, owner of United Beverage, the local Miller Lite distributor, to be the official sponsor. Shortly afterward, Z107, a successful classic rock 'n' roll station that had a long-standing relationship with Miller, joined in, and slowly but surely Borochoff began to see his



seemingly quixotic dream become a reality.

However, mass on-air exposure did not magically produce huge crowds. Borochoff and crew still had to battle the perception among those outside the immediate area that driving all the way into Downtown was too much of a pain and that parking would be a hassle. "The first few times, it was weird," recalls Donna McKenzie, the Z107 disc jockey who emceed Party on the Plaza every week in the early years. "There were about 100 people the first time I was there. I used to walk around and talk to everyone. It was nice being able to find out how much a part of their day I am and other jocks are."

She adds, "It was hard to get hands to come down to do the Plaza. They'd say, 'We can't go Downtown at night during a weeknight.' But they didn't understand the potential for exposure. Now hands are vying to play Party on the Plaza, because they can do really well for themselves."

Party on the Plaza now draws about 5,000 people every week, some from as far as Brenham and Louisiana. The Party has been largely welcomed by the Downtown population, but it hasn't gone completely unchallenged. "When they were filming *Robocop*, they tried to cancel us," says Borochoff. "They didn't even ask anybody. And the Houston International Festival tried to convince us to cancel the party during week of the Festival. But in all five years we've held the party, we haven't had to cancel for any reason other than weather largely because Bob Eury (president of Central Houston Inc.) is such a great communicator. He was able to convince anyone who tried to stop us that the show must go on."

Eury says, "When *Robocop* was filming by the Alley Theatre, they told us 'They're going to have to shut the party down this week.' But I said, 'Wait a minute, life Downtown shouldn't have to stop just for a movie.' So I got all the interested parties together. We exchanged information and realized that as long as we all knew each others needs, we could work together. Now people know that there will be a party Thursday afternoon unless it rains. And I've been there when there were 300 people holding umbrellas waiting for the band to start."



Although Borochoff had always intended for the event to be a fundraiser, he didn't start making money until mid-1989. "I came up with the whole idea because I thought it would be fun," he says. "But I always hoped that it would eventually make money. It's been a tremendous learning experience for me." Borochoff has been able to make good on his promise to donate to charity. Since he's a longtime fan of Downtown, particularly its historic Market Square District, the logical beneficiary was Central Houston Inc. and the Theater District. Since 1989, he has been giving them a sizeable chunk of profits made from concession sales. Donations from the past three years have totaled \$238,553.43.

Some of the other benefits for Downtown have been more subtle in nature. As Borochoff explains, "The

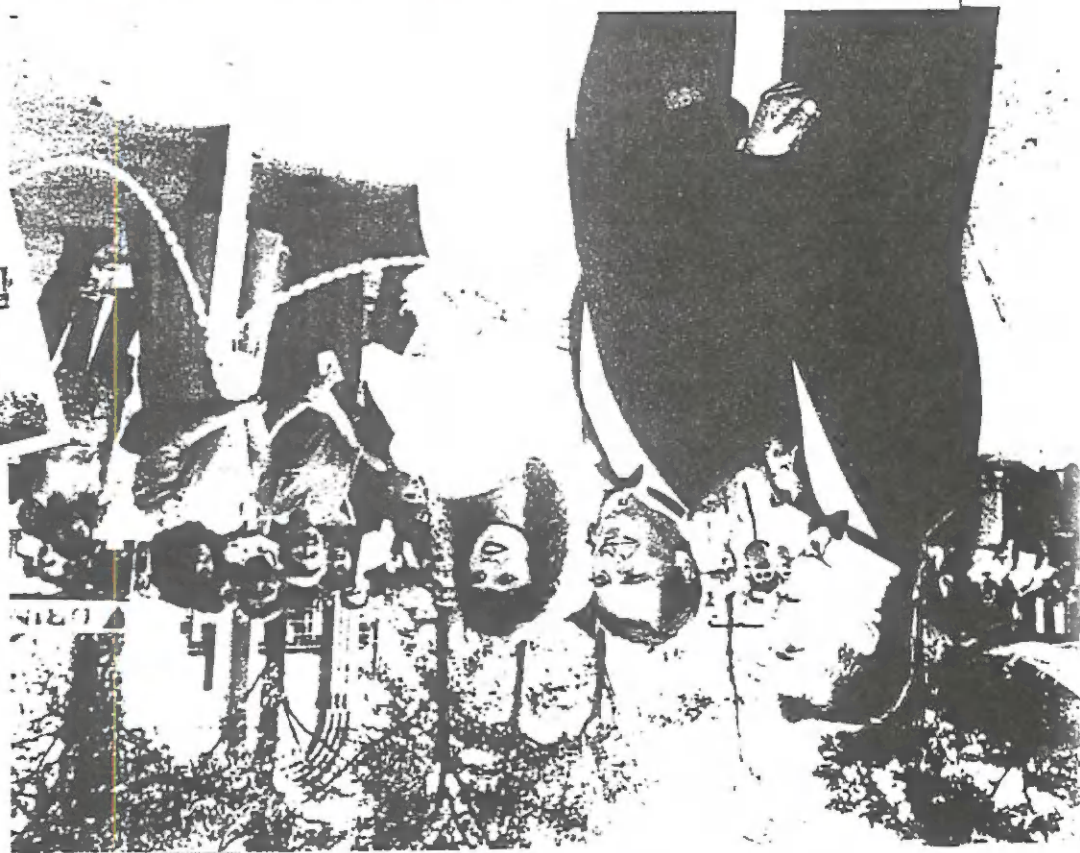
*"I remember one week
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Theater District sees Party on the Plaza as a way to promote itself. This year Central Houston Inc. reinvested some of the money and built a new stage for the bands. We used to have to erect a portable stage each week."

"Also, it's the best night of the week for some restaurants especially the Longhorn Cafe and Birraporetti's," he adds. "It doesn't cost the city anything. In fact, we pay a fee to the Parks & Recreation Department every year. And we leave the Plaza cleaner every Friday morning than it usually is the rest of the week. The clean-up crew steam cleans the area and removes all the trash by morning."

As for the profits not donated, "I try to put as much as possible back into the party without reducing the profits," says Borochoff. "The event business has become so large that people are expecting high quality. The standard for live music has gone way up. In the past, we were just happy to be doing something fun outdoors. Now we're spending money on improving the booths, sound quality and food quality and increasing the power capacity. I've had lots of opportunities to make major changes but I'm not going to do that."



Left: Greg Vithral, Mike Jackson and Suite Jackson. Above: Ashley Vithral, Alma Arroyave, Judge Eric Adell, Greg Vithral, Suite Jackson, Kevin Jackson and Bob Sanchez. Below, left: Secretary-of-the-Year winner Valero K. Brooks. Opposite page: A Party musician.

Borochoff has been approached

by other radio stations vying to

replace Z107 and by people wanting

to start a similar event in other cities.

In 1990, he attempted a Party on the

Plaza in Dallas with no success. "It is

not obvious what makes it work here

in Downtown Houston, ... the

concept is not easily duplicated. First

of all, the physical location is

unusual because there's no grass, but

there are places to sit down. It's not a

residential area. We're not bothering

anybody, and there's a dense

population to draw on Downtown."

Bob Ford, another Z107 disc

jockey and Party on the Plaza

devotee explains, "It works because

it's free and it's right in the middle of

the heart of Downtown, a couple of

blocks away from where people work.

And there are quite a number of

talented bands coming in playing

good, consistent rock 'n' roll."

Everyone agrees that the most

enticing aspect of the Party is the

people-watching. Z107's McKenzie

says, "I've never been to any event

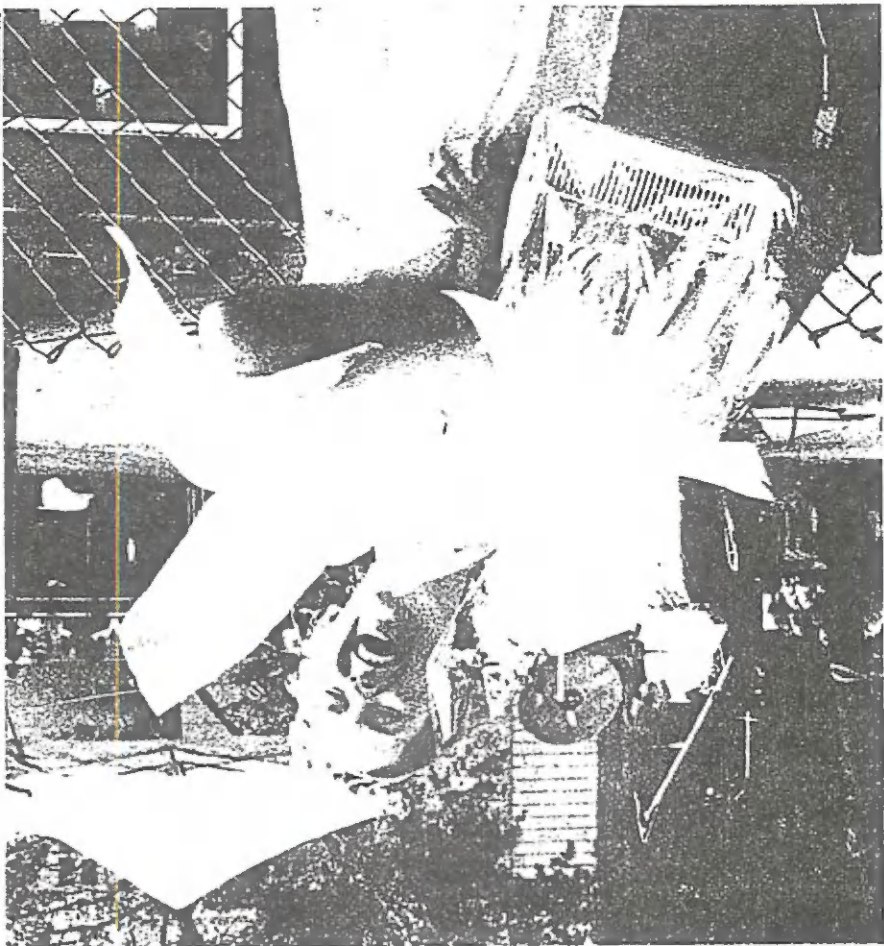
where you can see such a drastic

cross-section of the city: bosses in

their \$600 suits sitting next to their

secretaries, the guys who live under

the stage, the urban animals." Two



DRUM VENTURE